



The bust of Marsilio Ficino in Florence Cathedral. He is thought to be holding his translation of the works of Plato in the manner of a lyre, an instrument which he is said to have played superbly.

[*Epistolae, angl.*]
The Letters of
MARSILIO FICINO



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De perseverantia

On perseverance

Marsilio Ficino to Giovanni Altoviti: greetings.

THOSE who clasp us by the hand or by the neck pull the body, while those who engage the eyes attract the senses. But there are those who, through the ears and sense of hearing, carry away the heart^a and mind. Now you, through the ears, have won my heart!^a Indeed, so much has already sounded in my ears of your constancy and quality, through the words of our Giovanni Cavalcanti, that I have neither the ability nor even the desire to refrain from greatly respecting and loving you.

For the time being, let the sign of our love be this letter, approving your constancy and encouraging your perseverance, for there cannot be one without the other. The prudent do not consider a man worthy of approval unless he has been fully proved by fortune; and he has not been fully tried unless he has persevered¹ to the very end. The measure of the goodness of perseverance is that while other virtues promise good things, perseverance fulfils them. And the more difficult it is, the greater is its merit over the others.

Then do not be afraid of difficulty, for the good works of men are very brief but their reward is everlasting. Furthermore, a mind burning with resolution brings light to the dark, melts the frozen, softens the unyielding and tames the untameable.

Farewell.

¹ ms usque perseveraverit. Quantum^a animum

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Prudentis est nihil praeter salutem animi bonamque
corporis valitudinem exoptare*It is the nature of a prudent man to desire nothing beyond
the welfare of his soul and a healthy body*

Marsilio Ficino to his Andrea Cambini: greetings.

THERE are, Andrea, many mortals who are so greedy that every day they want many different things; in fact the things they want are innumerable, as if they could never be satisfied.

As my Cambini is a prudent and moderate man, I assume that he desires nothing beyond¹ the welfare of his soul and a healthy body.

So, good health, and at the same time farewell.

¹ ms arbitror, optat

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De musica

On music

Marsilio Ficino to Antonio Canigiani, a man both learned and wise: greetings.

You ask, Canigiani, why I so often combine the study of medicine with that of music. What, you say, has the trade of pharmacy to do with the lyre?

Astrologers might relate these two, Canigiani, to a conjunction of Jupiter with Mercury and Venus. They consider that medicine comes from Jupiter and music from Mercury and Venus. Followers of Plato, on the other hand, ascribe them both to one god, Apollo, whom the ancient theologians thought was the inventor of medicine and lord of the sounding lyre.

Orpheus, in his book of hymns,^[1] asserts that Apollo, by his vital rays, bestows health and life on all and drives away disease. Furthermore, by the sounding strings, that is, their vibrations and power, he regulates everything: by the *hypate*, the lowest string, winter;¹ by the *neate*, the highest string, summer; and by the *Dorians*, that is, the middle strings, he brings in spring and autumn. So, since the patron of music and discoverer of medicine are one and the same god, it is hardly surprising that both arts are often practised by the same man. In addition, the soul and body are in harmony with each other by a natural proportion,^[2] as are the parts of the soul and the parts of the body.² Indeed, the harmonious cycles of fevers and humours and the movements of the pulse itself also seem to imitate this harmony.

Plato and Aristotle taught,^[3] as we have often found from our own experience, that serious music maintains and restores this harmony to the parts of the soul,^[4] while medicine restores harmony to the parts of the body. Since the body and soul correspond with each other, as I have said, it is easy to care³ for the harmony of both body and soul in the same man. Hence Chiron practised both arts, whilst the prophet David is said to have soothed the soul as well as the body of the mad Saul with his lyre.^[5] Moreover, Democritus and Theophrastus maintained that this can be done in the case of other diseases, of both the body and the soul. And Pythagoras, Empedocles and the physician Asclepiades proved this in practice. Nor is this any matter for wonder. For sound and song arise from consideration in the mind, the impulse of fantasy^[6] and the desire of the heart, and in disturbing⁴ the air and lending measure to it they vibrate the airy spirit of the listener, which is the link between body and soul. Thus sound and song easily arouse the fantasy, affect the heart and reach the inmost recesses of the mind; they still, and also set in motion, the humours and the limbs of the body. This indeed was shown by Timotheus when,

¹ ms voce, hyemem. Neate,

² ms quoque corporis invicem

³ ms colere. Hinc

⁴ ms aere fracto et

by sounds, he roused King Alexander to fury and then restrained him; not to mention the miracles of Pythagoras^[7] and Empedocles who could quickly quell lust, anger or madness by serious music. Then again, using different modes, they used to stimulate lazy minds. And there are the stories told⁵ of Orpheus, Arion and Amphion.^[8]

But let us get back to the matter in hand. The first music takes place in reason, the second in fantasy and the third in words; thence follows song and after that the movement of the fingers in sound. Lastly the movement of the whole body in gymnastics or dancing. Thus we may see that the music of the soul is led by steps to all the limbs of the body. It is this music that orators, poets, painters, sculptors and architects seek to imitate in their work. Since, therefore, there is such strong communion between the music of the soul and of the body, is it surprising that both the body and the soul may be set in order by the same man?

Finally, anyone who has learned from the Pythagoreans, from the Platonists, Mercurius^[9] and Aristoxenus,^[10] that the universal soul and body, as well as each living being, conform to musical proportion, or who has learnt from the sacred writings of the Hebrews that God has ordered everything according to number, weight and measure, will not be surprised that nearly all living beings are made captive by harmony—nor will he blame Pythagoras, Empedocles and Socrates in his old age, for playing the lyre. Rather will he consider Themistocles ill-educated for refusing a lyre⁶ offered to him at a banquet. Our Plato showed in *Alcibiades*^[11] how music is the special concern of those men of knowledge who worship the Muses. He said that the Muses engender music, and that music was named after them. Plato does, however, criticise plaintive and light music^[12] on the grounds that it leads to lack of spirit, lechery and bad temper. But he recommends solemn and calming music as the most wholesome medicine for spirit, soul and body.

For myself, to say something of your friend Marsilio, this is why, after my studies in theology and medicine, I often resort to the solemn sound of the lyre and to singing, to avoid other sensual pleasures entirely. I do it also to banish vexations of both soul and body, and to raise the mind to the highest considerations and to God as much as I may. This I do with the authority of Mercurius and Plato, who say that music was given to us by God to subdue the body, temper the mind and render Him praise. I

⁵ ms Amphone narrantur. Verum

⁶ ms qui lyram sibi

know that David and Pythagoras taught this above all else and I believe they put it into practice.

Farewell.



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Verissima laus est, quae laude digna est

The truest praise is that which is worthy of praise

Marsilio Ficino to Giovanni Aurelio of Rimini: greetings.

YOU praise my lyre, Aurelio, with songs worthy of praise. I, in turn, will praise your songs with the lyre. Would that¹ my lyre were worthy of praise so that what you say² were true. Then I should sing truly³ and both of us⁴ give the truest praise. The truest praise is that which is worthy of praise.

Farewell.

¹ ms Sed utinam laude

² ms vera loquaris. Ego

³ ms Ego vere canam

⁴ ms uterque nostrum verissime



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Fœliciter amatur, qui a viro amatur amore dignissimo

He is fortunately loved who is loved by a man most worthy of love

Marsilio Ficino to Bernardo Bembo, the Venetian Orator: greetings.

I THOUGHT, Bernardo, such was my love for Marsilio, that never could I love him more. Since every man loves each single thing for the sake of

himself, and himself in each thing, it is himself that he loves most. But happily yesterday my opinion proved quite wrong, as I then began to love myself even more than usual when I discovered that I was most certainly loved by you, a man worthy of love above all others. Indeed, so highly do I esteem Bernardo, that I value myself as highly as I feel I am valued by him. So who can ever please me more than he through whom I am daily better pleased with myself? Would that I might always please you, Bernardo, and thus displease none of the wise.

And¹ for your love towards me, what return can I make but love? Other things are usually acquired at the cost of something else. But since love is born of its own free will,² it is therefore free and is never bought or sold at any price but itself.

Farewell.³

Florence.

¹ ms displiceam. Ergo amori

² ms voluntate nascatur

³ ms Vale



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De lege et iustitia

On law and justice

Marsilio Ficino to the magnanimous Lorenzo de' Medici: greetings.

I PROMISED LORENZO, on his return to Florence from Pisa on the seventh of March, if I remember rightly, that I would write to him when he next went to Pisa. Usually I write to friends because I wish to; on the present occasion I shall write because I must. It is just to keep a promise, for law ordains it so. So accept a just and lawful letter. No! To speak more truly, whenever I wish to write, then write I must, by the law of love; when I must write, then I also wish to, for the love of law. So today you will receive a letter written of my own accord and in accordance with the law.